



To the Moon and Back

WHEN I STARE INTO THE NIGHT SKY TO LOOK AT THE MOON, I see it much the same way you do. Not long ago, my wife and I had a couple days of vacation on the Amalfi coast in Italy. It is a romantic place, and together we watched beautiful sunsets and captivating moonrises. After 52 years of marriage, we are still very much in love—maybe more than ever—so times together like that are very special.

But there is another thing that comes to mind when I look up at the moon in the night sky, and it is something I share with only eleven other human beings. It is the satisfaction of knowing I have been there. I have walked on the moon.

IN 1964, DOTTY AND I HAD MOVED TO EDWARDS AIR FORCE BASE in the desolate high desert of Southern California, where I could train with Chuck Yeager as a test pilot. My buddies and I saw an article on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times*. NASA, the National Aeronautic and Space Administration, was seeking more astronauts. It read almost like an ad, listing the various qualifications: U.S. citizen, male, under six feet tall, no more than 36 years old, a degree in math or science, and more than 1,000 hours of flight time.

Obviously, the potential pool was a select group, but many of the guys who could meet the minimum standard were there at Edwards AFB with me. We applied, and before we knew it, we

were being put through all sorts of assessments—physicals, psychological tests, IQ tests, problem-solving challenges. Basically, NASA wanted to know how well we would respond to rigorous demands under pressure. In the middle of all that, three astronauts were killed in two separate plane crashes. For all the promise of adventure, this one thing was very clear: we were signing up for a job with risks beyond even that of test-piloting. This was specialized and demanding work.

When I was chosen for astronaut training along with seven of my buddies from Edwards AFB, it meant that our family would be moving to Houston, which was that much closer to Atlanta, where my wife Dotty was from. This thought appealed to her, but she also knew me to be an intense and dedicated man, and the intensity was only going to increase in the years ahead.

THE APOLLO MISSIONS, AS WELL AS EVERY OTHER NASA MISSION from Gemini to the space shuttles, were huge team efforts. You may have seen the patches or medals from one of the missions, with the names of the astronauts included. For the Apollo missions, there were always three names, but to make these missions happen, hundreds of people were involved, from engineers to scientists to safety experts to trainers to the backup crew.

As astronauts, we were trained to fly in space, but we did much more than this. Our training included hundreds of hours of focused effort. You knew you had to learn everything thoroughly, because a mistake could be fatal during a flight, or it could result in a mission abort. We learned all the systems, along with the emergency procedures in case something went wrong. We practiced over and over and over again, committing these procedures nearly to memory. Because the Apollo missions were centered around landing on the moon, we also had to have a significant



AN ASTRONAUT TELLS HIS STORY

Charlie Duke, Apollo 16, and life on earth

amount of knowledge about geology and eventually about the specific science experiments we would deploy and activate. We were very committed to doing the right thing, because when you are thorough in your planning and preparation, usually the performance and results work out.

My own training ahead of NASA included an engineering degree from MIT, so I was also involved in assisting with design and validating some of the features of the spacecraft. We all contributed in our own way, because when we had very knowledgeable people on the ground at Mission Control during a lunar mission, the collective expertise could save the day.

I came to understand the value of the team at Mission Control during Apollo 11, the first mission to the moon. I had been selected as CapCom (capsule communicator) for that mission, which meant that I was the voice for mission control to the astronauts in space and on the moon. When Neil Armstrong spoke man's first words from the moon, "Tranquility base here, the Eagle has landed," I was the one who responded from more than 200,000 miles away, though with a stutter, "Roger, Twanq... Tranquility, we copy you on the ground. You got a bunch of guys about to turn blue. We're breathing again! Thanks a lot!"

That was an amazing time for all of us at NASA, and it excited the rest of us astronauts that one day our turn would come to go to the moon. I didn't have to wait long. Immediately after the debriefing for Apollo 11, it was announced that I would be the backup lunar module pilot for Apollo 13, and in the normal rotation that meant I was in line for the crew of Apollo 16! This began the most exciting but maybe most damaging time of my entire life.

THE MAJORITY OF THE TRAINING FOR APOLLO FLIGHTS took place in Florida, but we were still living in Houston. Dotty knew how

much the mission meant to me, and she was very supportive in spite of building a house and raising two young boys. But in truth, it was a tough time relationally for us. When I came home, I'd bring my military drill instructor mentality with me, expecting instant obedience from a four- and a six-year-old. Back then I could also have an explosive temper, so mostly what I accomplished was to bring tension into the situation.

Fortunately, we had some neighbors who were really helpful. They had two kids about the age of our boys, and they all played together really well. This was a real support for Dotty, which was something I couldn't deliver. My focus was elsewhere.

As the days drew close for Apollo 16, that focus ramped up—that is, the public's focus on us and our focus on the mission. My fellow crew members, Ken Mattingly and John Young, and I, had poured so much preparation into this mission that we did not want anything to go wrong. I knew this full well! Ken had originally been slated to go up with Apollo 13, but a week before that mission, I had contracted the German measles and because Ken was not immune and had come into contact with me, he had been replaced by Jack Swigert. We didn't want something like this to happen again, so as we sat on that launching pad on the morning of April 16, 1972, we just wanted to get off the ground. Liftoff is a moment of concern for every space mission, as you sit atop a huge rocket with millions of gallons of fuel igniting below you.

Only 12 men have ever walked on the moon. What is true, however, is that millions of men through the ages have poured their heart and soul into their work and nearly destroyed their families while doing so.

But the countdown continued uninterrupted and soon we were on our way to the moon.

Four days later, as we prepared to land on the surface of the moon, we faced serious disappointment. One of the control systems required to ignite the surface propulsion system in the command service module was out. There is always a backup, but if that is all you have to depend on, you are in an abort situation. We orbited the moon again, waiting for word from Mission Control.



MORE ABOUT CHARLIE DUKE AND APOLLO 16

NASA has catalogued the photographs from the Apollo missions online. You will find hundreds of Apollo 16 images here: tinyurl.com/poc5w5u.

Additionally, Charlie Duke maintains a personal web site with videos, photos, memorabilia, and books (including his autobiography, *Moonwalker*) at www.charlieduke.net.

Could we go ahead? “Stand by,” they told us, “we’re looking at it.” Two years of training and now only an hour from landing we wondered if we were going to be called home. The minutes turned to hours until Mission Control radioed: “We got a workaround. We’re go for landing.” Back in those days, I didn’t say “hallelujah,” but that’s what I would say today. The delay was tough to take, but there was nothing you could do except hope for the best. We got the best. The training and the dedication to complete the mission was certainly evident at Mission Control, and they came up with the right solution for us. Soon we were walking on the moon.

LIKE I SAID, ONLY 12 MEN HAVE EVER WALKED ON THE MOON. What is true, however, is that millions of men through the ages have poured their heart and soul into their work and nearly destroyed their families while doing so. This was true for me not only as a moonwalker, but as a man intense about everything. Three years after the Apollo program wound down, I threw all my effort into building a beer distributorship in San Antonio. Dotty had been hoping that when my astronaut days were over, I would have more time for my wife and sons. Instead, I was working harder than ever, and she was growing increasingly desperate. She will tell you that life was so painful that she had trouble getting out of bed in the morning, let alone putting on a smile and pretending like things were OK. She thought seriously of ending her life.

That’s when God intervened. We were churchgoers, attending a local Episcopal church and making our religious way, but it was never very real for us until October 1975. That’s when our church hosted a spiritual renewal weekend, called Faith Alive. Dotty committed to going and found everything she needed. She received Jesus into her heart that very weekend, and it didn’t take long for me to notice the difference.

Even though I was going to work at 4:30 in the morning and not getting home until 7:00 or 8:00 at night, things were more peaceful at home. Where they were not peaceful was at work. Several things in the business were frustrating me, and after things had built up for about 18 months, Dotty said to me one day, “Why don’t you pray and see what the Lord wants you to do about the beer business?”

I said, “Why don’t you pray for us?”

And she did. I don’t remember exactly what she said, but it sounded like this: “Lord, if you want Charlie in the beer business, give him peace; but if you don’t, make it miserable.”

Sure enough, while the money got better and better, the work got more and more frustrating. What do you do? I sold the business. It just wasn’t right for me.

Then about a month later, a friend invited me to a Bible study

at T Bar M tennis ranch. That weekend I met Jesus for myself. It was sort of a step here and a step there, but the Lord orchestrated the circumstances in my life to lead me to this point of decision. What I recognized was that each person has to make a choice. When Jesus said things like “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” was he telling the truth or was he telling a lie? God will never interfere with your decision, but you have to choose. So through that and other convincing scriptures, like John 3:16, I chose to recognize the truth of Jesus. I said, “Jesus, come into my heart,” and I experienced the peace of God for the very first time. I knew that it was the truth and my life would never be the same.

I had sold my business and hadn’t started anything new yet, so the next day I began to read the Scriptures. I had this insatiable desire to read the Bible! A lot of it I didn’t understand, but I asked God for insight, and as the time came he revealed to me the truth. I also began to be convicted of my sin. A lot of people, their sins are out front, and that’s why they come to the Lord. But mine were sort of hidden. I was an “I’m OK” kind of guy. But the Lord showed me in Ephesians, “Husbands, love your wives” and he sent me this message: “The problem with your marriage is you.” That’ll get your attention! So I repented. Then I read, “You’ve got to get rid of your explosive temper,” so I did. Then, “Stop cursing your children, bless your children.” God was judging my heart. So I responded positively. I didn’t reject it, I didn’t fight it, I knew it was true. The book of Hebrews includes a passage that says, “The word of God is living and active and sharper than a two-edged sword and judges the attitudes of the heart.” This is exactly what was happening to me.

ITOLD YOU AT THE BEGINNING OF THIS LITTLE ARTICLE that Dotty and I have now been married for 52 years and that we love each other more than ever. I can’t imagine having said that in 1975. I simply couldn’t see it. In fact, I might have told you that we were steaming toward divorce. I went so far as to think, *What if this happens? Well, there are a lot of other women out there.* It seems impossible when you’re young and in love like we had been when we first married that you would ever want to casually throw it all off. But it can happen, even to people who look like they have it all together.

I know now that a lot of relatives and friends were praying for us. God honored those prayers and saved us both and saved our marriage and our family. Today we have nine grandchildren, and we love sharing our lives with them just as much as we love sharing our story with men and women all over the world. We get to speak to younger people and older people alike, and our message is consistent. You can’t live life when everything is out of balance. I was successful mentally and physically, but I was spiritually dead until I was 42 years old. That was a big mistake in my life. For all the care and attention I gave to the mission to the moon, I paid almost no attention to the most important things—my relationship with God and my relationship with my family. And that’s far more dangerous even than riding a Saturn rocket at 25,000 miles per hour.)

CHARLIE DUKE, THE GOLFER

When I was younger, golf was intense. I got down to a 2-handicap, something like that. But I was in Germany at the time, so I didn’t have a chance to play—this was when I was in my 20s. I didn’t have a chance to play in any amateur tournaments or stuff like that. But golf was a real love for me, ever since I was 14 years old. Then when my boys came along and got old enough to want to play, we used to go out and play a lot together.

One of my golfing buddies was another astronaut, Gene Cernan. We used to go up to Champions in north Houston and play that course. We got to be honorary members there, and Jimmy Demaret and Jackie Burke were friends and would let us play up there. That was really a nice time. When I moved up to the San Antonio area, Jimmy and a couple of other fellows were starting Onion Creek, and we started playing up there. Then Darrel Royal, the former coach at the University of Texas, was a really good friend and he lived up there. We started playing together, and for a number of years I played in his golf tournament. I had another friend in Fort Worth, and he used to play with Ben Hogan a lot, so I got to play with Ben Hogan a couple of times. It was just a delight. These were my boyhood heroes on the golf course, so to be able to have that thrill of meeting them and becoming friends was really good.

Now we travel a lot and I don’t get to play very much, because the Lord’s got us on the road a lot in ministry and also my income comes from motivational speaking around the country and around the world. I do talks on teamwork and outstanding performance, delivering under pressure, the importance of thorough planning and thorough preparation, because that usually leads to good performance.